

PROPHETIC MINISTRY: THE BLACK CHURCH & THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

by Bishop William P. DeVaux

**For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required;
and to whom men have committed much, of him they shall ask the
more.**

(KJV, Luke 12: 48)

Introduction

The relationship between theological education and the Black church stands at a critical juncture. This paper will reflect on the state of theological education and the black church. It will begin with a definition of the task of theological education.

The first major concern involves understanding the nature of the black church. There is considerable misinformation about the black religious experience and its participants. A second issue is the problem of moving from the disciplines of theology to the practice of ministry. This issue is much larger than matters dealing only with the black church. However, it takes on a unique perspective when approached from the standpoint of the black religious experience. Finally, some suggestions will be offered regarding strategies that will enhance theological education's effectiveness in meeting the needs of the black church.

The task of theological education is to prepare Christian ministers who will be prophetic in thought, word and action. The skills needed to assume this prophetic posture include the capacities of engaging in critical reflection, integrating material received from the various disciplines of theology and applying these theories within the context of Christian ministry. The term prophetic for purposes of this discussion is defined as using the skills acquired through an intellectually rigorous program of study to model the will and word of God in the world.

Tasks and Challenges of Theological Education

Theological education has made a significant contribution to the black church. Most African-American denominational officials, pastors and members are convinced that formal training is a necessity for persons who will serve in Christian ministry. The Master of Divinity degree is considered as the minimal requirement for service. While there is general support for a theologically trained cadre of clergy persons, there is also concern about the manner in which theological education is conducted.

The issue is presented first as a problem dealing with how skills acquired in seminary can be applied to the practice of ministry. Many black church people enter the conversation questioning the sincerity of white theological educators as they seek to deal with issues of race, ethnicity and culture. Their concerns are based on the history of prejudice they have experienced in secular and religious environments. Apprehension leads to mistrust. If theological educators are insensitive to matters critical to understanding the black religious experience, how can they be expected to guide students in applying the theoretical materials they receive?

A second concern relates to the question of sensitivity. Black pastors and scholars are convinced that not only has theological education failed to address concerns arising out of the black religious experience but that it is by its nature oppressive. The theological disciplines presented in predominantly white seminaries and divinity schools have seldom made liberation and justice themes central to the curriculum. As a result, black students are placed at a disadvantage when appropriating what they have learned. They must filter through or disregard a great deal of the material they have been taught. Often the effort to translate theories into practice is abandoned before the application phase really begins. Persons committed to critical reflection may become frustrated believing that most of their theological education is of little consequence to the people they serve.

African American pastors have a duty to interpret the word of God to their congregations. The graduates of seminaries and divinity schools have a special function in the world of theological reflection. They stand at the intersection of the disciplines of theology and the day-to-day work of Christian ministry. Their task is to make the language of theology come alive with power in the lives of their members. Secondly, men and women with formal training are uniquely

qualified to assist scholars and theological administrators in understanding how their ministry of scholarship is being received. They need to understand thoroughly the disciplines of theology and their relationship one to another. In this process, they should raise the issue of how the subjects presented will be applied in the practice of ministry. At the same time, they cannot uncritically dismiss information just because it seems to fail the test of practical application. The persons who are theologically prepared are the “bridges” between the academy and the church. Their responsibilities will increase as advances are made in the field of scholarship and as the black church continues to grow.

The Black Church

Failure to recognize the diversity of the black church has hampered full and complete communication between white schools of theology and black seminarians. Any analysis of the black church and theological education must be done with care. The multidimensional nature of the religious experience can cause serious problems for theological educators. Definitive statements, descriptions and assumptions about how black Americans approach their religious faith are usually inadequate. Black Christians come to their religious experience from vastly different positions. No one theological tradition can capture the totality of the black religious experience. Contrary to popular thinking, black religious music and forms of worship cannot be assigned to neat categories. In addition, polity and managerial styles vary. Black Christians come from a wide variety of denominational backgrounds and doctrinal orientations. Generally speaking, the black church has its origins in the white religious experience. Often black churches have more in common with the churches from which they came than they do with African American congregations in their own communities.

The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church provides an example of this phenomenon. Its historical roots are in Methodism. The Church has followed the doctrine and polity of the Methodist Church with few modifications for over 214 years. AMEs share more in common with the United Methodist Church than with black churches that do not come from the Methodist tradition. While it is difficult to capture the essence of the black church, there are some characteristics that are found in most black churches:

- ◆ The membership is predominantly African-American.
- ◆ The church is clearly identified with (and located in) the black community.

- ◆ The concept of ministry includes concern for the spiritual as well as the social and physical well being of the congregation. This quality means that the black church is generally a central element in movements for freedom and justice.
- ◆ Preaching is the central event in the worship experience.
- ◆ Church properties and land are black owned and operated.

These features may appear to be obvious and simplistic. However, a more complete description would mean presuming more than the substantive evidence will support. What is needed is an objective investigation into the current situation of the black church in America. Theological educators may want to undertake this task. For now, there are some critical issues involving the black church that should be addressed. Theological education should provide:

1. Formal training in all the disciplines of theology that will prepare men and women for service in Christian ministry;
2. Educational opportunities that enhance the skills required to integrate concepts from these disciplines into a coherent system of understanding; and
3. Models, illustrations and examples that demonstrate how the theoretical materials presented can come alive within Christian communities.

An illustration from Professor Howie Hendricks underscores the mission for theological education. A layman told him that he loved his pastor. Dr. Hendricks asked why. He replied, “He’s had a ‘brush with reality.’ I’m so tired of hearing guys come out of seminary talking about nothing that has anything to do with where I live.” (Hendricks, 2001).

Men and women who are the beneficiaries of theological education should be academically fully prepared. They should model how scholarship and pastoral ministry are vitally intertwined. Theological education should add a profound dimension to their ministry. It ought to facilitate communications and open new arenas of service rather than creating distance between the ordained clergy and the people they serve.

An examination of theological education and the black church should include the issues being discussed among black church people. One matter concerns the role of church leaders. The authority of pastors, bishops, denominational officials and other ordained clergypersons has generally been accepted as

being essential to the successful operation of the church. The respect accorded these leaders is based on a traditional approach to Christian ministry. Most black Christians agree that the “call” to Christian ministry ranks qualitatively higher than decisions to enter other vocations. For this reason, African Americans seldom use the term “call” when referring to other professions. Being called has meant that members of the ordained clergy have been set apart. The man or woman of God has been granted special status and privilege within the community.

Authority based on a special calling has often led to uncontested leadership by pastors and church officials. Their status coupled with the fact that the church was the focal point in the black community provided a substantial power base. It was from this position that black religious leaders gained power far beyond the confines of their churches. They have often used their strength in communities to become change agents in the battle for justice and equal rights for their people.

The authority of black pastors and church leaders is currently being challenged from different perspectives. Concerns are being raised about authority figures in almost every segment of society. The children of the baby boomer generation are not nearly as willing to accept authority as their parents were. They have been disillusioned by the deceit displayed in episodes like Watergate, the Viet Nam conflict, and widespread misuse of governmental powers. Church members have seen how the serious personal flaws of some leaders have been condoned or ignored even within their churches. Black Christians at the local and denominational levels have also endured the turmoil of dealing with problems involving sexual misconduct, manipulation of money and abuse of power.

Black Christians also question authority as a consequence of the social and political progress that has come in part through the efforts of black religious leaders. We are living in the post civil rights era. The social ills of racism and poverty have not been eliminated. However, many benefits of the movement for social justice can be enjoyed without having to make serious personal and collective sacrifices. As a result, black Christians today have higher expectations about their place in society and in the church than their parents. They are also less inclined to accept pastoral authority that does not recognize their sense of independence and self esteem.

One of the gains from the civil rights struggle is increased access to educational opportunities. As black Christians have become better educated, two positive

results have been realized. Their professional and vocational choices have been expanded and their dependence on other educated leaders, including pastors and church officials, has diminished. Black pastors are serving more college graduates and highly skilled technicians than they were just a few years ago. In this church environment, excessive pastoral authority and ecclesiastical control are considered to be oppressive and outmoded. Black churches, while prophesying against the evils of racism and social injustice, must eliminate anything within their own ranks that is coercive.

The movement for freedom from clerical and denominational control is evident in two other arenas within the black church. First, laypersons are playing more significant roles in the life of the church. Secondly, independent or non-traditional churches claiming no denominational affiliation are flourishing in black communities as they expand their membership and influence.

In the past, black lay people have generally not been at the decision making level in their denominations. For the reasons already mentioned, they have been relatively content to accept the leadership of pastors and church officials. That posture is changing. The shift in thinking has been influenced, in part, by a new sense of independence among members. There is, however, another important reason. African Americans are increasingly aware that Christian ministry extends far beyond the domain of the ordained clergy. They have been exposed to compelling appeals for church expansion and a substantial number are expressing an urgency to be actively engaged in the mission of church expansion.

Today's church members have relegated tradition to a far less significant role. Many younger church members are unwilling to participate in the movement to expand the Christian Church under the banner of denominations as they are currently constituted. The tolerance level for ecclesiastical procedures and rules is rapidly being reached. For many black church people, independent churches provide new and exciting opportunities for ministry. The leadership of these churches is often characterized by dominant personalities. Some independent church leaders have revealed their own propensity to tyrannical behavior and moral weaknesses as well as their dogmatic dispositions. They are subject to the same kind criticism that is directed toward denominationally based church leaders. What they offer, however, is a different approach to Christian service. Lay involvement, outreach ministries and dynamic worship are elements in their success in attracting new members

The leaders of non-traditional churches do not place much importance on theological education. A Master of Divinity degree often is not a prerequisite for ordination and a pastoral appointment. Other methods of validation are being developed. The practice of “anointing” persons for service who give evidence of spiritual gifts is becoming a widely accepted form of confirmation for ministry. Pastoral leadership is also being transmitted through family relationships. These families can be either biological units or groups drawn together by the spirit. Spiritual families are comprised of candidates who received their call to service while under the care of a particular pastor. They are described as the pastor’s sons and daughters in ministry.

Other issues have brought new life and ferment within black churches. Concerns relative to gender equality among the ordained clergy, the status of openly gay and lesbian members as well as pastors and the place of the neo-pentecostal movement are the subjects of serious discussion in African American churches. The manner in which these matters are resolved will help set the agenda for African American churches in the future.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Theological educators must seek to understand the breath and depth of the black religious experience. They face an awesome task. Yet, it is one that is essential to the mission of preparing men and women who will be God’s witnesses in churches and communities that are constantly in flux. If theological educators and African American pastors are to work effectively together there are some issues that should be addressed.

An admission of missed opportunities is the first step in rebuilding confidence and improving communication. Educators and pastors must accept their responsibility for the current situation. Scholars have not always been forthcoming in revealing how their research affects Christian ministry beyond the academic setting. Excellence in scholarship demands participation in creative and innovative research. A second task is the presentation of data in a manner that facilitates the learning process. However, a third obligation is also important. Teachers should prepare students to apply what they have acquired to the practice of ministry. Professor Cornel West believes that theological educators must adopt a new approach if they are to be effective:

An appropriate starting point for reform is seminary professors creating for themselves a sense of vocation and purpose that revels in the life of the mind – always in conversation with the best that is being thought and written regarding their intellectual concerns – yet puts this at the service of the people of God. Seminary professors first and foremost must view themselves as servants of the kingdom of God and thereby resist the lucrative temptations of a flaccid careerism and a flagrant denominationalism. (West, 1988).

While scholarship is the primary focus of their ministry, Professor West suggests that religious scholars can change the character of theological education by providing students “a new and novel sense of what it means to have a vocation as a Christian intellectual in our times” (West, 1988). West calls for a new vocational attitude among pastors and scholars. Seminary professors are challenged to see themselves primarily as servants to all the people of God. On the other hand, pastors are invited to view their work in ministry as an exercise in Christian intellectualism. Scholars need to re-evaluate their approach to teaching, and black pastors must draw on all the elements of the seminary experience to be effective in Christian ministry.

Many black Christians desire theologically trained pastors. There is, however, an interesting phenomenon that occurs in some churches. When a guest preacher is introduced, the following comments are often made. “She may have a BA, Bachelor of Arts degree, but what really matters is her ‘BA,’ her born again credentials.” The feelings expressed in these remarks indicate that training, though important, cannot replace the power found in a personal relationship with God. Some African American Christians go a step further by saying, “As you get the learning do not lose the burning.” Inherent in this caution is the message that intellectual accomplishments can diminish spiritual zeal. The prophets mentioned throughout this paper should model that “the learning and the burning” are both critical elements for effective Christian ministry. The temptation to move toward “the burning” at the expense of “the learning” can at times be overwhelming. However, the tension that exists between these vital aspects brings creativity and excitement to the life of the church.

Black pastors are faced with a dilemma not unlike what their colleagues in the ministry of scholarship encounter. The pressure for appreciation, acceptance, and advancement in their fields of expertise is always present for teachers of religion. Just as members of the academic community must affirm scholars, pastors also need validation from the churches and denominations they serve.

For this reason, they may de-emphasize their academic training in order to meet expectations arising within their congregations and among denominational officials. In some instances, a seminary degree becomes like a union card. It is necessary for admission into Christian ministry but of limited importance for future service.

Scholars and pastors must avoid taking the path of least resistance. The work of scholarship is considerably less taxing when confined within the academy. Pastors can be successful by emphasizing religious enthusiasm rather than struggling with issues of life and death that threaten basic faith commitments. Why the righteous suffer, the point at which a life begins and how biblical history coincides with scientific data concerning creation are a few examples. Professors and pastors often underestimate the capacities of their students and members. Seminary students can reflect critically on the relationship between the disciplines of theology and the practice of ministry. They also can become prophetic interpreters when given the opportunity to expand their minds. In like manner, African American Christians are also far more capable of dealing with critical issues of theological reflection than most pastors are willing to share with them.

A program designed to bring professors and black “Christian intellectuals” together should be implemented. The purpose would be to analyze what elements of seminary education led pastors to incorporate the disciplines of theology into their practice of ministry. Areas of special importance should include pedagogical styles, curriculum development, the climate of acceptance existing among the seminary community, accessibility to faculty, appreciation of cultural diversities and openness to new forms of religious expression. The pastors who are committed to the task of prophetic interpretation could also enter into partnership with scholars for the purpose of producing materials that reflect the unity of their service to the people of God.

There are other research models that could be useful. For example, a group of African American pastors from a wide variety of church backgrounds could meet regularly with professors of religion to discuss the state of theological education in the black church. The theological educators should be representatives from denominational seminaries, university-based divinity schools and independent schools of religion. The men and women who participate should also vary in age and professional experience. The final product of the time spent together would be a series of essays from the members dealing with the future of theological education and the black church.

Forty years ago a number of theologically trained ministers served as models for black seminarians. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the intellectual progeny of Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, was the primary example. He demonstrated how a passion for the gospel and academic excellence formed the background for a powerful ministry.

Dr. King patterned his life after men like his father, Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr., Dr. Mays, Dr. Samuel D. Proctor and Dr. Gardner C. Taylor. Dr. Taylor remains vitally active in the affairs of the church. He remains a valuable resource for any scholar who is serious about understanding the black church. The Reverends Proctor, Mays and King have left legacies of service and written materials that should be the subject of research for black and white scholars. Incentives should be provided so that students will be encouraged to learn more about their ministry. The “giants” of the church mentioned above are powerful models of how the practice of ministry is sustained by a deep sense of intellectual integrity. Research based on their ministry and that of other clergy committed to academic excellence would be a major contribution to the vocation of Christian ministry.

A second means of approaching the mission of theological education should involve conversations with pastors who are not committed to the values of theological education. The selection process in this instance will be more difficult because often these pastors have very little contact with traditional seminaries or schools of divinity. However, it is a task that must be done. Pastors from non-traditional churches are needed in any projects dealing with theological education and the black church because they represent an increasingly large percentage of the black religious community.

Religious leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. who effectively combined scholarship and a passion for preaching were the heroes for an earlier generation of black seminarians. Today, pastors like The Reverends Eddie L. Long, Fred Price, T. D. Jakes and Creflo Dollar are leading churches with large memberships; so large that they are known as mega-churches. In addition, they have gained national and international influence by their exposure on television. They now represent a new paradigm for ministry. Black students still show great admiration for well-educated clergy and pastors from tradition churches. However, they are also deeply impressed with the success of the non-traditional pastors, especially in the areas of churches growth and development. The church leaders operating from a pastor-evangelist model are usually not associated with mainline denominations. And, they generally do not rely on traditional sources of theological education to prepare themselves and their members to serve in Christian ministry. The contributions of mega-church

pastors and television evangelists should be analyzed if theological educators are to fully appreciate the contemporary African American religious experience.

The initiative for programs that create dialogue among all parties involved in the theological education is the responsibility of professors and administrators. They have the skills to write proposals, find funding sources and establish protocols for research projects. However, a successful partnership will also require a commitment from black churches and their leaders to provide financial support for theological students as well as African American theological institutions.

The Fund for Theological Education (FTE) has provided financial assistance to gifted black students in seminary and graduate school since 1960. It was organized after a consultation in Greenwich, Connecticut designed to address the shortage of educated black clergy. Its mission was to establish a “program to recruit and finance black seminarians” (Rooks, 1983). The mission of FTE is as important today as it was forty years ago. However, now an increasingly large number of black churches have the capacity to support seminary education. Black denominations, non-traditional churches and African Americans in predominantly white churches must be willing to participate in all aspects of theological education including fund raising. Full commitment will ensure that they will be involved in charting the future course of theological education among African Americans.

In the course of this paper, issues involving the differences between the black church and theological education have been raised. Misconceptions about the role of black pastors and professors have also been noted. The underlying theme has been an appeal for mutual understanding. Some suggestions about facilitating the process of cooperation have been offered. In the final analysis, it is the sense of a common mission that will bring educators and pastors into a strong working relationship. The mission is to spread the gospel of Christ throughout the world. It is a task shared by the whole Christian family. Two thousand years of church history reveal that Christians have not reached perfection in unifying the work of kingdom building. Nevertheless, fellowship and mutual support are goals worthy of the church’s strongest efforts. These elements are also essential ingredients for building a sense of community between the black church and theological educators.

Communities are strengthened when the parties in relationship listen and learn from each other. Some efforts in the past have begun with faulty assumptions and misguided enthusiasm. Today, the dialogues cannot be occasions for

exaggerated demands for immediate changes or quiet acquiescence on issues that are extremely urgent. The stakes are too high on both sides. Quick fixes and cliché-ridden explanations will not meet the needs of the current situation.

If theological educators and the black pastors are to work in harmony, they must first emphasize their common mission. Secondly, they should realize their need for each other. The history and impact of the Christian Church in America cannot be fully comprehended without a deep appreciation for the black religious experience. Likewise, the contributions of the black church in the past have come about in large measure because of a commitment to theological education for clergy. The future of African American churches is also very much tied to the world of theological reflections. Seminary-trained pastors are only part of the answer for black Christians. African American scholars from the time of Dr. Benjamin E. Mays until the present have used scholarship as the means of keeping the story of religion in the black community alive.

The black church will always require a new contingent of scholars to investigate, analyze and interpret the majesty of the religious experience among black people. Even when theological education did not comprehend or fully appreciate the importance of the black church, it provided the tools that produced scholars like Professors James H. Cone, Gayraud S. Wilmore, Jacquelyn Grant-Collier, Cornel West, and Vincent L. Wimbush. Their scholarly contributions will be greatly enhanced by lessons learned from pastors serving at the nexus of the church and the academy.

There are a large number of men and women awaiting an opportunity to serve as scholars, pastors, chaplains, pastoral counselors and Christian education specialists in the black church. Their ministries will be dramatically strengthened if they can study in an educational environment that includes a keen sensitivity to and a deep appreciation for the black religious experience. Building a community of trust, openness and mutual dependence between the black church and theological education is an important element in the cause of spreading the gospel of Christ. The final solutions will not be easily or quickly achieved but the work must continue.

This paper began with Jesus' admonition concerning the requirements of Christian service. He reminded his disciples that if they had received much from God that much would be required of them. His words are certainly meant for theological educators, pastors who have benefited from formal training and church members who have been the beneficiaries of well prepared clerical leadership. Much is required to create and sustain an environment where

academic excellence and passion for the gospel’s message complement each other as vital elements in the cause of Christian mission. Paul is the foremost example of a prophetic interpreter or “Christian intellectual” in the New Testament. He, above all the disciples, understood the challenge of applying theological concepts to the practice of ministry. In fact, he was chosen to be a disciple in part because of his background as a scholar. His counsel to the Galatians was meant for all Christians who are engaged in long-term projects and seemingly impossible tasks. In the mission of relating the church and the black church, he would remind all who serve: “And let us not be weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap if we faint not.” (KJV, Galatians 6: 9)

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